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Jon R. Antonsen

*University of Minnesota, Morris*

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Jon Antonsen

23 March 2017

## **The Platform Strategy: Concession to Win Elections**

### *Introduction*

This paper sought to provide one answer to the question: when do parties incorporate centrist ideas in a platform? This question came about from the 1988 election: the Democrats controlled the Congress, but they wanted to regain footing in the presidency. Their previous election performance was fraught with inter-partisan conflict: the liberal House of Humphrey had fallen victim to the Vietnam War and Ronald Reagan had effectively poisoned the word “liberal.” Centrist Democrats fought with liberal Democrats over trivial issues, and the 1984 convention ended in fiery disunity. After being out of power for a long time, to reconcile their differences, the Democrats came together and created a short, concise, and agreeable party platform which would lay the groundwork for the renewed confidence of the American people and secure a “win” in the 1992 presidential election.

Analysis began with modern political party platforms from the Democrats and Republicans starting with 1948 and ending with 2012. Each platform was then put through *Diction*, a content analysis program which scores different facets of rhetoric. After this, 10 rhetoric scores were chosen to represent a “conciliation score,” and each conciliation score was compared to 4 different environmental factors at the time of the respective party platform’s publishing: party divisions in the House and Senate, party unity scores of the House and Senate, party control of the presidency, and polling data leading up to the day of publishing of the party platform in question. After comparing conciliation scores of a platform to their respective

environments, the results showed that there wasn't a clear pattern that showed when parties incorporate centrism into their party platforms.

### *Literature Review*

Political party platforms are a mainstay of the political process in the United States which trace their roots back to the beginnings of the party system. Despite their longevity, political party platforms have not received a lot of attention from political scientists—however their importance should not be measured by a lack of scholarly research. The first party platform was written in 1840 by the Democrats, and since then there have been endless squabbles over platform planks—battles mostly invisible to the general observer. However, politicians frequently deviate from their party's platform planks, so why all the fight? There are two questions I seek to answer throughout this review is this: Do party platforms matter, and what processes affect the final content of a party platform?

Party platforms do, in fact, matter. When looking at party platforms from 1932 to 1980, political parties tried to fulfill/fulfilled a clear majority of their campaign promises presented on their party's platform (Pomper, 1980). This suggests that politicians generally pay attention to and advocate for the planks presented on their party's platform. Additionally, voters' perceptions of candidates are greatly affected by the tone of a party platform, i.e. this means that despite the true ideology of a presidential candidate, a candidate can seem more radical or moderate based on the positions enumerated in a party platform—even if the candidate in question does not share those beliefs (Simas, 2011), thus platforms can help change perceptions of candidates to better suit their electability.

Additionally, if a presidential candidate is given a platform that they are not comfortable running on, then they will be less effective at campaigning for those platform planks and thus jeopardize an election. For example, in 1992 the religious right had coopted the Republican platform. This gave Bush a conservative platform that he was not comfortable running on. Due to his apprehension, he was ineffective at campaigning for those ideas, thus leading to one factor which cost him his reelection (Maisal, 1993). Finally, as Pomper notes in his book, “if platforms are meaningless, it seems odd that they should bring, as they have, severe intraparty disagreement, and the attention of interest groups, mass media, and practical politicians” (Pomper, 1980).

Since platforms matter, what processes affect the final platform? There are many groups who try to influence the party platform drafting process, and this is important to understand the processes and environment under which party platforms are written. To begin, the way these groups outside of the drafting process try to influence the drafting process is through testimonies before drafting committees. These outside groups hope that testimonies will lead to the adoption of their policy positions (or, at the very least, their wording of policy positions) into a platform.

The most obvious outside group that testifies in front of a drafting committee is government elites. The research conducted on government elites does not focus on the strategies which government elites use when testifying in front of committees, but instead focuses on the structure of the Democratic and Republican parties to determine from who the party platform committee receives testimony. What is found is that Democrats have an even spread of local and national government elites, whereas the Republicans hear testimony more from national elites. Because the research conducted on this group is so sparse, it is unsafe to state conclusive reasons

for the difference in government elites—however the most accepted theory is the difference in structural organization of the Democratic and Republican parties (Fine, 1994b; Grossman, 2016).

Interest groups are another group who try to influence the modern party platform drafting process. When analyzing interest group behavior during the platform drafting process, there are four hypotheses to explain their behavior. The first one assumes interest groups will try to testify before parties who are more receptive to outside guidance—and generally these parties are out-of-power. The second hypothesis states that interest groups will testify before parties who are the expected victor because they can try to ensure that their interests are realized. The third hypothesis states that interest groups will testify equally before both parties, and in that way, they will have an even chance of their policy positions being adopted by at least one party (if not both). Finally, the last hypothesis states that interest groups will testify before parties that are friendly to their policy positions—which is useful because an interest group can inform the platform drafters how to execute a specific policy. Research concludes that all four of these strategies were utilized in testimonies by interest groups, however it is unclear if interest groups influenced the final draft of a respective party platform (Fine, 1994a). The main reason that these hypotheses are important is not necessarily what they are, but what they represent—they show ways in which external parties can influence the drafting process, thus making the political party platform in question more susceptible to the environment of its drafting.

This next idea is not about process per se, but it is still important to mention. Some research has focused on federal expenditures and their relation to party platforms, and interestingly, there is considerable correlation between an emphasized portion of a party platform and—when its respective candidate is in power—the number of federal dollars spent to fulfill that emphasis (Budge, 1992). Considering that the data used in the study lies between 1948-

1985, reliance on this correlation should be minimal—especially considering the changing role of party platforms that may have occurred since the 1984 election.

Lastly, some research has suggested parties alter their platforms because of a “need to win.” Before the 1992 Democratic Platform, it was observed that the 1988 Democratic platform was centered around “a remarkable show of unity at their... national convention....” (National, 1997). The hypothesis which explains this event states that the unity presented at the 1988 Democratic Convention happened because of a “need to win” an election—and in turn, the Democratic Party considerably shortened and conservatized their party’s platform. “As early as December 1987, Paul Kirk, Jr., Democratic Party Chairman, advocated a 1988 party platform that was short, thematic, and that avoided specifics.... Party leaders felt they could not exhaust energies in a needless conflict over issues when the Republicans enjoyed the advantage of an issue consensus on many of the main problems facing the country” (Walters, 1990). Expanding upon 1988’s “need-to-win” hypothesis, in 1992 the Democratic Leadership Council continued the spirit of 1988 by pushing the Democrats to adopt “a platform heavily influenced by the centrist ideas” that the DLC propagated in hopes of appealing to a wider array of voters (National, 1997).

From these theories arise a few avenues from which to analyze party platform drafting processes: namely, interest group influence (Fine, 1994a; Fine, 1994b; Parris, 1972; Maisal, 1993), federal expenditure goals (Budge, 1990), and the desire to win an election (National, 1997; Walters, 1990). Much of the research conducted on party platforms is pre-1992. This will present a problem, because—especially after the Democratic Party Platform of 1992—there may have been a significant shift in the role of the party platform in American politics. Additionally, research on the processes which affect party platform drafting is incomplete. The strategies used

by the parties themselves on platforms are not enumerated in any study I found. The “need to win” hypothesis (discussed in relation to the 1988 and 1992 elections) was the closest example of a party and interest group affecting the drafting process of a platform—and it also is the most interesting.

### *Research Design*

Expanding on the “need to win” hypothesis, I hypothesize that one strategy parties use to gain control is incorporating conciliatory language into party platforms as an effort to gain power (an effort in this case is considered an alteration of the party platform). In other words, if a party is disunified, out of power, and/or election polling looks dismal, a party will adopt conciliatory language and shorten their platform to regain political capital. If they have no power and traditional politicking isn’t securing gains to win back power, then the conciliation strategy described above could be used to gain more power. That is why the Democratic response in 1988 was so drastic—because the DNC had been out of the White House for so long, the DNC had to radically moderate their platform in a way to gain that one more position of power.

In choosing the platforms for this study, the focus is on choosing those which allow for inferences about how modern platforms work. The first political platform was written in 1840 by the Democrats, however this study cannot begin there for a few reasons. Firstly, political machines and the spoils system could have significantly affected the role of political party platforms in American politics. Additionally, the direct election of Senators (added in 1913) changed the electoral contest by adding another position of power to election cycles. Even after that, one more consideration would be World War II: the role of government changed considerably during this time—extending greatly into the lives of regular Americans. Therefore,

this case study will only consider platforms which happened after the first major election not affected by these considerations—the 1948 platforms. I am not going to consider interest groups in this study because to objectively measure their influence on party platforms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be close to impossible due to the lack of data on the subject.

From there, party platforms were analyzed. This method was partially inspired by a 1970 computerized study of political party platforms which looked at changing language, rhetoric, and values in party platforms (Namewirth, 1970). Firstly, I recorded their word length. Next, platform content was analyzed using the computer program *Diction*, using 10 of their included analytical dictionaries: Accomplishment, Aggression, Ambivalence, Blame, Inspiration, Leveling, Passivity, Praise, Rapport, and Tenacity (for complete definitions of these variables, consult Appendix A). *Diction* scores texts based on a positive-scalar quantitative analysis—for example, a high score in variable  $x$  means that the document in question exudes  $x$  much more than a lower score in the same variable. After *Diction*'s analysis, the platforms were separated by party. This way, when means for the scores are taken, party platforms are compared against themselves—thus controlling for structural differences in parties.

Then, the word count of each platform and *Diction* dictionaries were categorized into two variables: “emphasized” and “diminished” variables. Emphasized variables are variables which one would expect to be emphasized in a “need-to-win” platform—and thus its score would be statistically larger than the mean score. For this project, Accomplishment, Ambivalence, Inspiration, Leveling, Passivity, Praise, and Rapport are emphasized variables. Diminished variables, on the other hand, would be diminished in “need-to-win” platforms. For this project, a platform's word count, Aggression, Blame, and Tenacity are diminished variables—and its score would be statistically smaller than the mean score.



After this process, the emphasized and diminished variables will be analyzed with a  $z$ -test. This test will show how many standard deviations a measurement is from the mean, thus accounting for the differing prevalence of each individual variable within each party platform—thus allowing for one to observe differing degrees of conciliation more accurately.

After  $z$ -scores are generated for each of the variables for each of the platforms in this sample, a “conciliation score” will be generated. This score is calculated as follows:

$$C = \sum(E) - \sum(D)$$

Wherein  $C$  equals the “conciliation score,”  $E$  equals the summation of the  $z$ -scores from the emphasized variables, and  $D$  equals the summation of the  $z$ -scores from the diminished variables. The result of this equation is a comparative score that allows the understanding of the degree of conciliation present in any given party platform, from which a larger score indicates a more conciliatory platform.

I will then analyze the environment of a platforms writing focusing on party unity, polling numbers, and party divisions in government. For this paper, party unity is the unity of elected politicians. The analysis of politician-party unity will be determined by the “Party Unity” subset of DW-Nominate scores—in which there are scores for both the House and Senate. After this, historical Trial-Heat polling data from Gallup was examined, recording the May 1, June 1, July 1, and August 1 proximate polls.<sup>1</sup> If a party was polling behind the other party, then the low polls may worry the losing party’s leadership. Lastly, composition of the government was

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<sup>1</sup> To explain what proximate means in this case, polls weren’t always archived from every day; Gallup sometimes only kept one set of polling numbers per month. If a Gallup poll wasn’t recorded on the first of the month, then the next closest date was used to represent the Gallup polling data for that month.

recorded. For the sample election years, the party of the House, Senate, and current president was recorded.

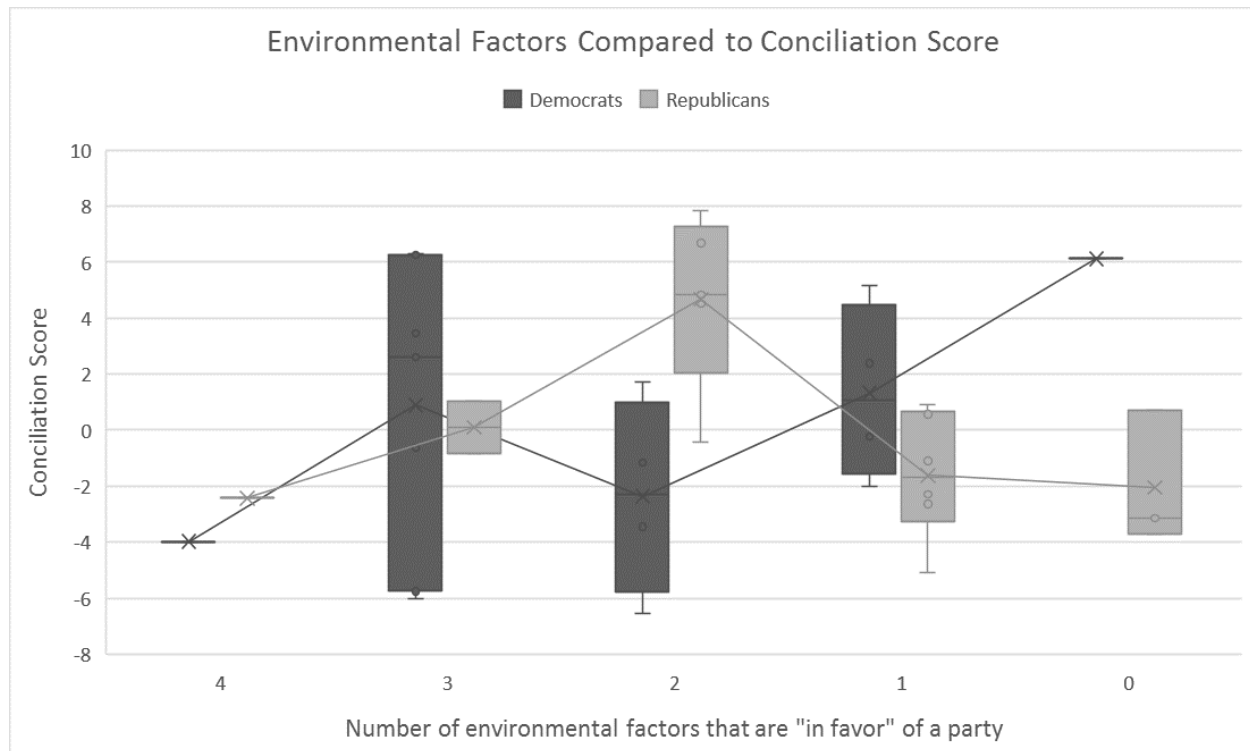
During this final analysis, this paper will compare each platform's conciliation score to each environmental factor. Close attention was paid to the environment to see under which situation the conciliation hypothesis is fulfilled the most, for it was unclear which situation affects conciliation the most. Each conciliation score was compared separately to the 5 different environmental factors (current party of the president, current party division of the Senate, current party division of the House, party unity scores, and polling numbers) to see which environmental factors affected platform conciliation scores the most.

### *Analysis*

To begin, when conciliation scores are compared to the control of the House, the Democrats' and Republicans' mean scores follow my hypothesis—when they are out-of-power in the House, their conciliation scores increase—however, the distributions for each party are so wide that no definitive conclusion can be reached for either. The same analysis applies when talking about the Senate: the Democrats' mean conciliation score follows the hypothesized trends, however the Republicans' mean conciliation score does not, however the distributions are so large that no definitive conclusions can be made about the trends observed in the data. Again, when conciliation scores are compared to the party identification of the President at the time of platform publishing, the Democrats' mean conciliation score follows the hypothesized trends, but the Republicans' mean conciliation score does not. However, once again, the distributions are so large that no definitive conclusion can be made for either party (see Appendix B for charts).

When comparing House DW-Nominate “Party Unity” Data to conciliation scores, a positive trendline is expected under the hypothesized platform. The Republicans’ regression line does not follow the hypothesized trend ( $y = -0.0924x + 8.0618$ ) and its correlation is low ( $R^2 = 0.0238$ ). The Democrats’ regression line follows the hypothesized trend ( $y = 0.0509x - 3.9415$ ) however its correlation is also low ( $R^2 = 0.0059$ ). When comparing Senate DW-Nominate “Party Unity” Data to conciliation scores, a positive trendline is expected under the hypothesized platform. The Republicans’ regression line follows the hypothesized trend ( $y = 0.0046x - 0.0568$ ) and its correlation is low ( $R^2 = 5.000 \times 10^{-8}$ ). The Democrats’ regression line also follows the hypothesized trend ( $y = 0.0745x - 5.7836$ ) however its correlation is also low ( $R^2 = 0.0013$ ). When House and Senate DW-Nominate “Party Unity” Data is averaged together to create a “Congressional” DW-Nominate “Party Unity” Score, a positive trendline is also expected. The Republicans’ regression line does not follow the hypothesized trend ( $y = -0.0400x + 3.6115$ ) and its correlation is low ( $R^2 = 0.0048$ ). The Democrats’ regression line follows the hypothesized trend ( $y = 0.0664x - 5.178$ ) however its correlation is also low ( $R^2 = 0.0096$ ) (See Appendix C for charts).

When conciliation scores are compared to polls recorded leading up to the platform publishing date, a platform would be hypothesized to be more conciliatory when a party is losing in those polls. Republicans’ mean score trend does not follow the expected trend, however its distribution is large, so no definitive conclusion can be reached. Democrats’ mean score trend follows the expected trend, however its distribution is so large that no definitive conclusion can be reached.



When comparing conciliation scores to the number of environmental factors that are “in favor” of a party, the hypothesized trend is as follows: the smaller number of environmental factors in favor of a party at the time of a platform’s publishing, the higher the conciliation score will be. The Democrats’ mean score generally followed the hypothesized trend, however distributions were so erratic that the relationship is not definitive. Republicans did not follow the trend, however, like the Democrats, their distributions were so erratic that one cannot discern a definitive relationship from the results.

### *Conclusions*

These results are not surprising. This study had a small sample size, thus inconclusive results were to be expected from a statistical standpoint alone. Using  $z$ -scores with such a small

sample size may have been problematic, however they were useful to help standardize *Diction* dictionary scores to allow for comparisons between dictionary scores. Linear regression lines generally supported my hypothesis, however that is only generally—not all trendlines supported my hypothesis, and all lines were fraught with low correlations. It is not clear whether a higher sample size would have affected my correlation results.

Aside from the statistical problems presented by the data, there were some problems I encountered while doing my research. Historical Trial-Heat polling data was hard to find. In fact, the Trial-Heat data I used in my study was taken from images on Gallup website—not an actual datasheet—and because of this fact, there were some problems gathering the data. The data points on the images had the numbers, however in some cases it was unclear when a particular Trial-Heat poll was conducted—I had to trust my judgement. Additionally, aside from Namewirth 1970, I couldn't find any meaningful studies to guide my content analysis methodology. To begin, the dictionaries I chose may not be the best representation of “conciliation.” This is due to a lack of related scholarly research done with *Diction* and an overall lack of experience at UMM with *Diction*—faculty members and students were not sure how to answer many of my questions.

However, despite the aforementioned problems with the study itself, there are other variables to consider: this study could not control for everything, and that is important to understand when assessing the results of this paper. To begin, platforms are never written by the same authors, thus differences in tone, style, and in organization are very difficult to account for between individual platforms. Also, it is unclear how much party structure plays a difference in platform drafting—and thus the role of the platform may be different between the Republican and Democratic parties. Strategic differences between the Republican and Democratic parties are

also difficult to control for—does one party use conciliation more than the other? Or did one party shift its strategy over time? Lastly, it was mentioned in the literature review that interest groups influence party platforms, however it is very unclear how much influence they actually have—how frequently do parties adopt interest group language into their platforms, and when do parties accept interest group language?

Despite the problematic outcome of this paper, this research is still important. Though party platforms are incredibly hard to analyze, one could apply this methodology to campaign speeches or debate performances—presumably, these are less affected by outside variables such as party structure and interest groups and more focused on communicating a candidate's views to the public. Additionally, even though this paper's particular methodology failed, it would still be interesting to answer these secondary research questions: who controls party platform language the most? What role does structure play in party platform drafting processes, and what role do platforms play in each party? Lastly, how has the role of platforms changed over time—and could the changing role of platforms partly account for the results of this study?

## Appendix A

*DICTION Variable Definitions* (Diction 2014)

| <u>Variable</u> | <u>Definition</u>   |
|-----------------|---|
| Accomplishment  | Words expressing task-completion (establish, finish, influence, proceed) and organized human behavior (motivated, influence, leader, manage). Includes capitalistic terms (buy, produce, employees, sell), modes of expansion (grow, increase, generate, construction) and general functionality (handling, strengthen, succeed, outputs). Also included is programmatic language: agenda, enacted, working, leadership.  |
| Aggression      | A dictionary embracing human competition and forceful action. Its terms connote physical energy (blast, crash, explode, collide), social domination (conquest, attacking, dictatorships, violation), and goal-directedness (crusade, commanded, challenging, overcome). In addition, words associated with personal triumph (mastered, rambunctious, pushy), excess human energy (prod, poke, pound, shove), disassembly (dismantle, demolish, overturn, veto) and resistance (prevent, reduce, defend, curbed) are included. |
| Ambivalence     | Words expressing hesitation or uncertainty, implying a speaker's inability or unwillingness to commit to the verbalization being made. Included are hedges (allegedly, perhaps, might), statements of inexactness (almost, approximate, vague, somewhere) and confusion (baffled, puzzling, hesitate). Also included are words of restrained possibility (could, would, he'd) and mystery (dilemma, guess, suppose, seems).   |
| Blame           | Terms designating social inappropriateness (mean, naive, sloppy, stupid) as well as downright evil (fascist, blood-thirsty, repugnant, malicious) compose this dictionary. In addition, adjectives describing unfortunate circumstances (bankrupt, rash, morbid, embarrassing) or unplanned vicissitudes (weary, nervous, painful, detrimental) are included. The dictionary also contains outright denigrations: cruel, illegitimate, offensive, miserly.  |
| Inspiration     | Abstract virtues deserving of universal respect. Most of the terms in this dictionary are nouns isolating desirable moral qualities (faith, honesty, self-sacrifice, virtue) as well as attractive personal qualities   |

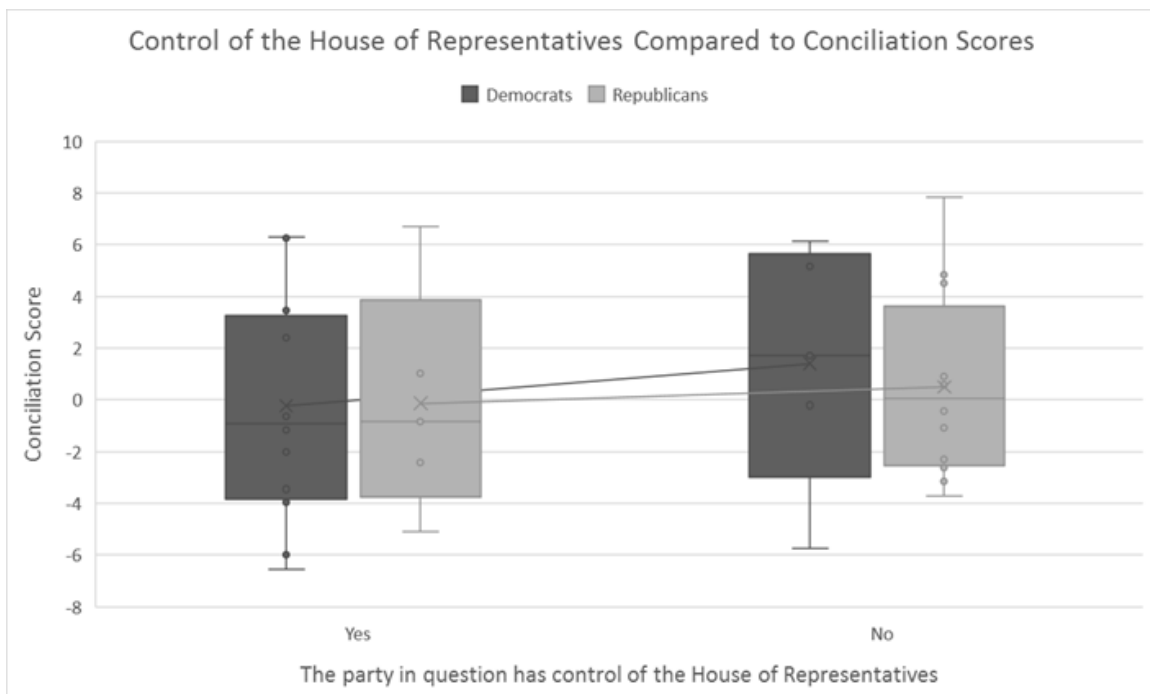
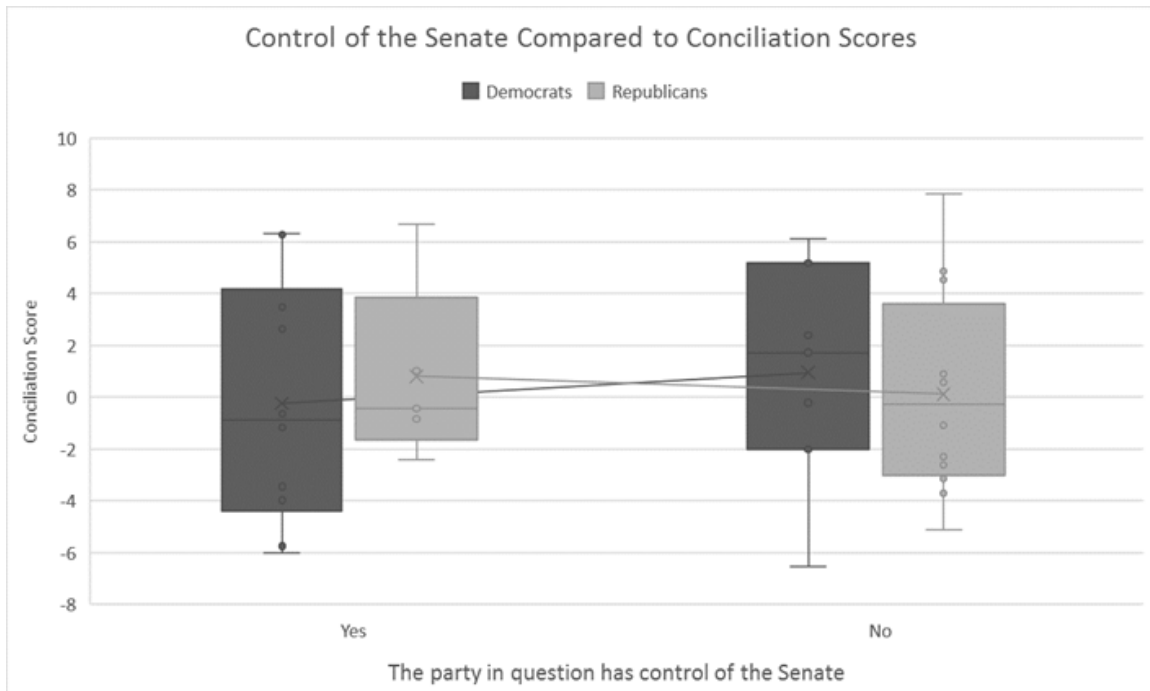
(courage, dedication, wisdom, mercy). Social and political ideals are also included: patriotism, success, education, justice.

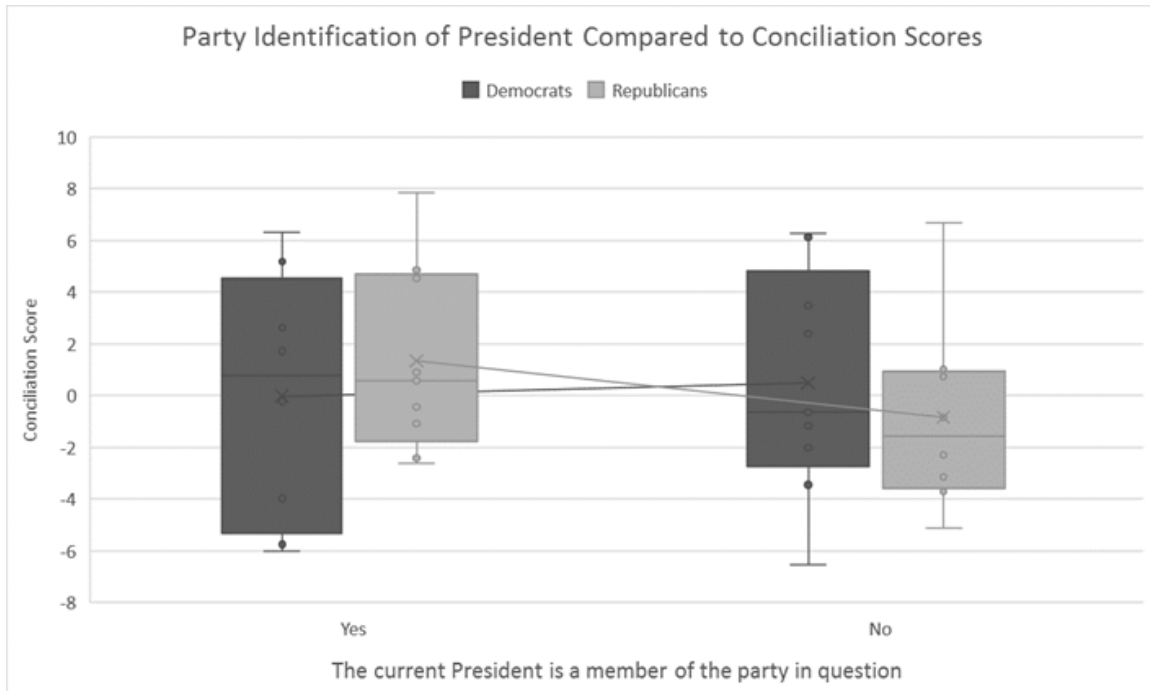
|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Leveling     | Words used to ignore individual differences and to build a sense of completeness and assurance. Included are totalizing terms (everybody, anyone, each, fully), adverbs of permanence (always, completely, inevitably, consistently), and resolute adjectives (unconditional, consummate, absolute, open-and-shut).  |
| Passivity    | Words ranging from neutrality to inactivity. Includes terms of compliance (allow, tame, appeasement), docility (submit, contented, sluggish), and cessation (arrested, capitulate, refrain, yielding). Also contains tokens of inertness (backward, immobile, silence, inhibit) and disinterest (unconcerned, nonchalant, stoic), as well as tranquility (quietly, sleepy, vacation).                                  |
| Praise       | Affirmations of some person, group, or abstract entity. Included are terms isolating important social qualities (dear, delightful, witty), physical qualities (mighty, handsome, beautiful), intellectual qualities (shrewd, bright, vigilant, reasonable), entrepreneurial qualities (successful, conscientious, renowned), and moral qualities (faithful, good, noble). All terms in this dictionary are adjectives. |
| Rapport      | This dictionary describes attitudinal similarities among groups of people. Included are terms of affinity (congenial, camaraderie, companion), assent (approve, vouched, warrants), deference (tolerant, willing, permission), and id entity (equivalent, resemble, consensus).  |
| Satisfaction | Terms associated with positive affective states (cheerful, passionate, happiness), with moments of undiminished joy (thanks, smile, welcome) and pleasurable diversion (excited, fun, lucky), or with moments of triumph (celebrating, pride, auspicious). Also included are words of nurturance: healing, encourage, secure, relieved.  |
| Tenacity     | All uses of the verb to be (is, am, will, shall) three definitive verb forms (has, must, do) and their variants, as well as all associated contraction's (he'll, they've, ain't). These verbs connote confidence and totality.   |



## Appendix B

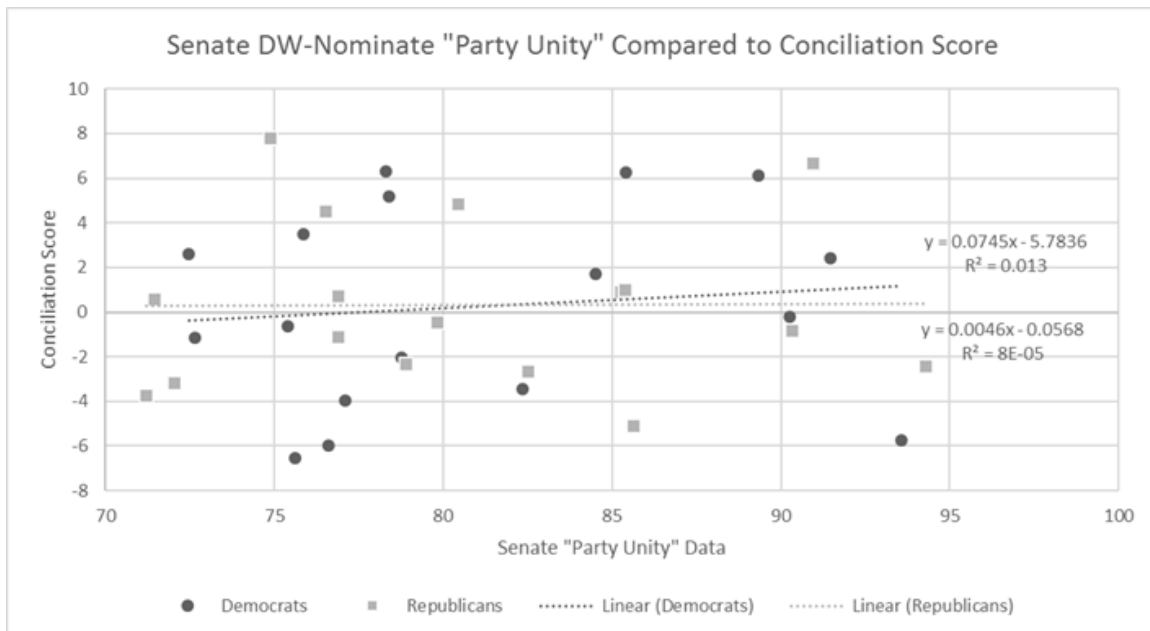
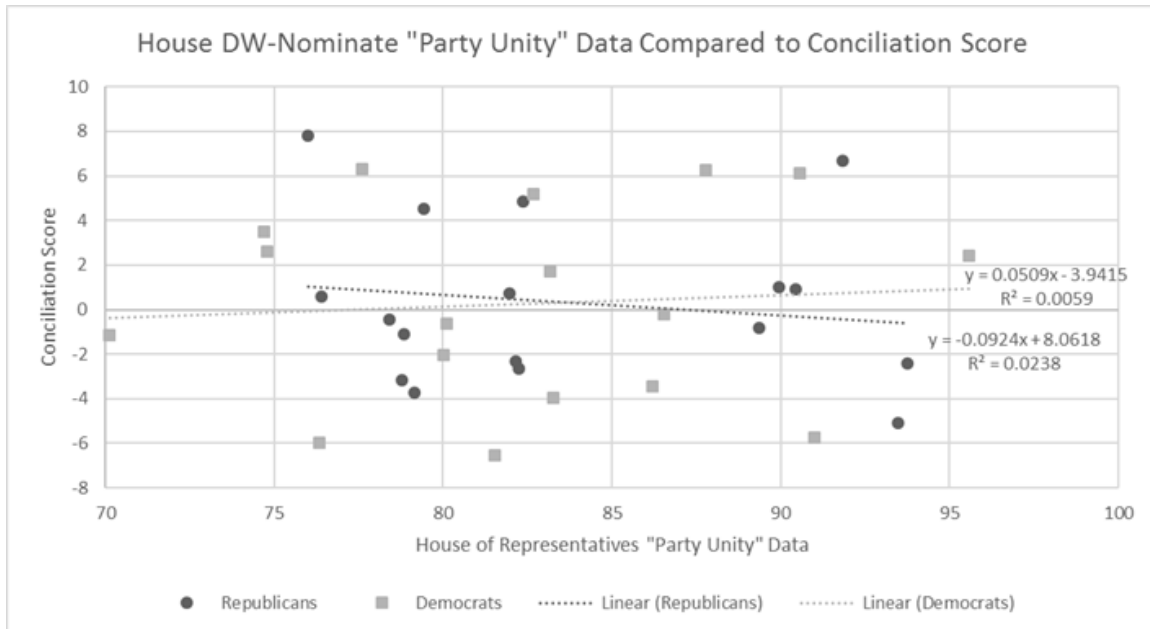
### Charts relating to House and Senate Party Divisions

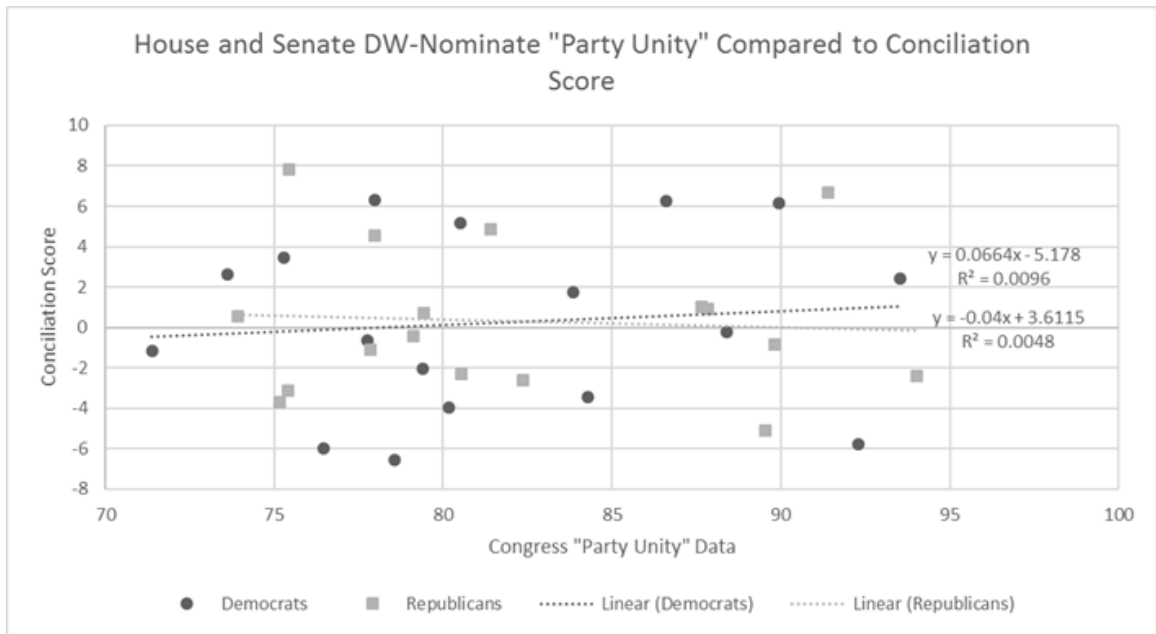




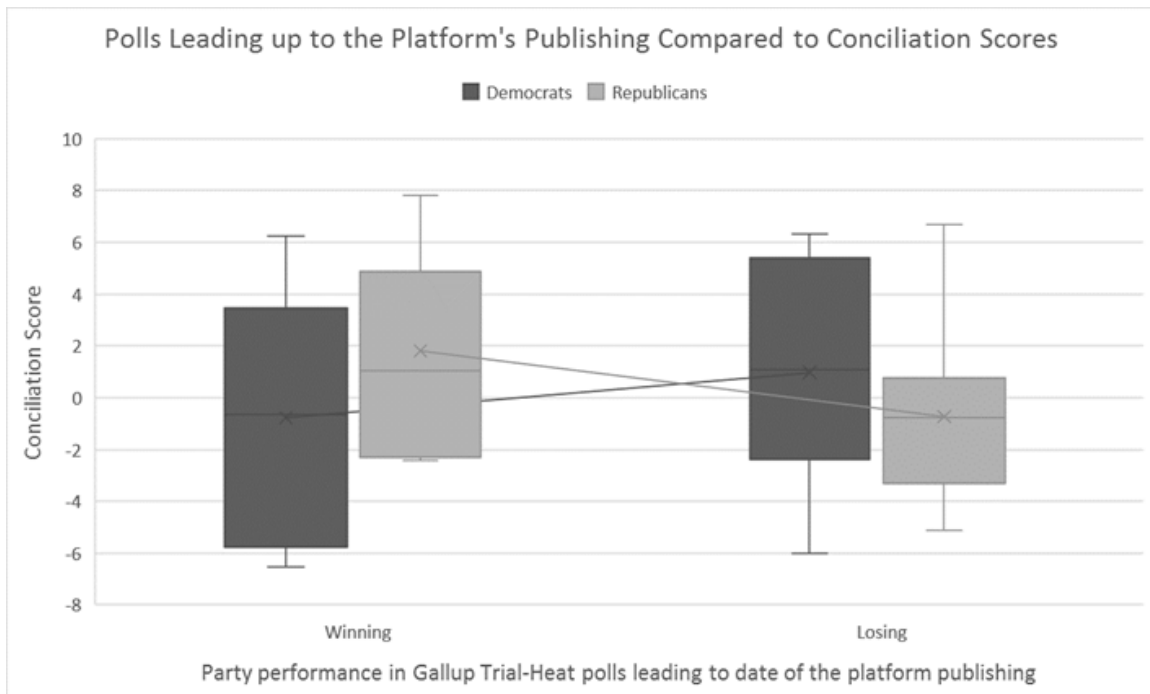
## Appendix C

## Charts relating to House and Senate DW-Nominate Party Unity Scores





## Appendix D

*Chart Comparing Polls Leading up to Platform Publishing Date to Conciliation Score*

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